



How People Become Pro-Life Activists

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More than four decades after landmark Supreme Court decisions in 1973, the battle over abortion is as fierce as ever in the United States. From the courthouse steps to suburban strip malls, from state legislatures to the streets, the pro-life movement continues to rally thousands of activists and millions of dollars each year to oppose access to abortion services. Why do people join this battle as pro-life activists?

Many observers take it for granted that conservative religion spurs people to action, but churches seldom do much to push congregants into the movement. Perhaps individuals choose to become anti-abortion activists on their own because the issue is intensely important to them. Plausible as this seems, my research on how people join and become active in the pro-life movement reveals that strong beliefs about abortion are not a prerequisite. To learn how activism develops, I have done observations and in-depth interviews in communities across the country. This research has led me to a startling and important discovery: Firm anti-abortion beliefs are as often the result of activism as the cause of it; and the role of organized religion in the process of making activists is not nearly as decisive as many presume.

A Process, Not an Epiphany

For most of those who get involved, pro-life activism begins not because of any epiphany – not because they first arrive at some new realization or unequivocal beliefs about the evils of abortion – but because they are drawn into activities in a series of small steps that, at first, happen without much thought about their larger meaning.

- The process begins at a turning point in a person's life, when he or she bumps into someone already in the pro-life movement, interacting with a friend, neighbor, or work colleague in the course of an ordinary day. Such encounters happen all the time, but they can open the door to new forms of activism when they occur during a juncture of change in a person's life course – for example, after someone leaves home for college, relocates to a new part of the country, retires, or goes through any other event that brings modifications in daily routines and habits.
- During such turning points, a person may dip a toe into anti-abortion activities, not so much out of preconceived commitment to the cause, but because of simple curiosity, solidarity with a friend, or a promise to go with a neighbor to an anti-abortion meeting.
- Only after people get involved in meetings or events, do most neophytes begin to develop clear pro-life beliefs. Thereafter, some go on to greater levels of movement participation over many years, while others pull back after the initial engagements.

When committed activists tell stories, many recount a cataclysmic experience or amazing fact about abortion that suddenly changed their lives and led them into the movement. But the reality is more gradual and mundane. The vast majority of people who become pro-life activists are drawn in gradually through interpersonal networks and shared experiences.

Learning to Care

Indeed, the most startling reality of the pro-life movement is that most eventual activists participate first, *before* they develop any recognizable pro-life beliefs. Considering oneself to be “pro-life” is not even a prerequisite for getting involved. Almost a quarter of the pro-life activists I interviewed actually considered themselves to be pro-choicers on the eve of their involvement. Activists learn to care about the issue – and oppose abortion – as the result of actually doing things with others already involved in the movement.

Surprising as this finding seems, it makes sense when we realize that the clarity and firmness of public beliefs about abortion is often exaggerated, for example when the media reports on public opinion surveys. Most

Americans, including those that go on to become pro-life or pro-choice activists, do not have well-formed beliefs about abortion. The vast majority are ambivalent about this issue and have not spent a lot of time sorting out exactly what they think or talking with associates about abortions or the relevant laws. Even strongly declared positions may be shallow and subject to change. This is the real-world social context in which both the pro-life and the pro-choice movements recruit new activists to lead battles in local communities, states, and at the federal level. Both movements have to draw new activists from the ranks of friends, neighbors, and co-workers who do not have this issue at the top of their minds or daily agendas.

Activism and Religious Faith

The pro-life movement is usually assumed to be deeply enmeshed in churches, an outgrowth of conservative religious faith and commitment. But religious traditions vary on this issue; and abortion sparks so many conflicts that even the most conservative congregations may shy away from embracing of organized activism or trying to push people into it.

This is not to say that religion is unimportant. Observations and interviews show that pro-life activism can also serve as a kind religious practice. In fact, it is frequently a catalyst for religious awakening, because activists are converted or experience an invigoration of faiths they left behind years before. Participants in pro-life discussions, meetings, rallies, and campaigns typically are not sent by their churches. But engagement may spark heightened religious faith.

The Future of Pro-Life Activism

My findings about how people actually become pro-life activists have larger implications. Because the pro-life movement itself creates and sustains the beliefs that underlie it, the movement is likely to remain robust even if U.S. public attitudes about abortion become less polarized. Pro-lifers recruit from broad pools of people with various pre-existing views, not just from the ranks of those already firmly opposed to abortion – and not only from the politically organized Religious Right. Pro-life Americans have long-standing, vigorous groups and ties into many communities and social settings. For the foreseeable future, they will continue to be able to reach out and draw even initially ambivalent fellow citizens into their cause.

Read more in Ziad Munson, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).